

FACT SHEET



Mercury Alert

March 2000

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, an increasing number of residential mercury spills have been reported to the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 7, which includes the states of Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska. Mercury releases have occurred from mercury pressure gauges used to test gas lines and from some types of home thermostats. Other mercury releases, which required significant cleanup efforts, resulted from plumbers working on antiquated heating systems, such as the Honeywell heat generator (pictured below). These plumbers, perhaps unfamiliar with the harmful effects of mercury, had been hired to repair an existing system or replace the old system with a newer one. Real estate agents, home inspectors, plumbers, contractors or anyone else who encounters the Honeywell heat generator in a home, should be aware that the unit contains mercury, a hazardous material.

EPA is providing this fact sheet in an attempt to prevent mercury spills from occurring, and to alert you to the potential health risks and liability issues related to a mercury release.

MERCURY CLEANUPS

EPA's response to mercury spills in homes has consisted of evacuating the residents and providing temporary housing, gathering visible mercury with a special vacuum, and heating and ventilating the house to drive off the harmful mercury vapors. In some instances, walls, carpeting, and floors of houses have had to be removed because they were contaminated. Personal possessions have also been discarded if they became contaminated and the mercury could not be removed. Much of this contaminated material has had to be sent to a special landfill or recycler at a substantial cost to EPA. Often, mercury has been spread from the original spill location into vehicles and other homes via shoes, clothing, and the transfer of personal property and cleaning supplies. In Region 7, the cost of cleaning up contamination resulting from



Figure 1: The Honeywell heat generator is shown in the foreground.

mercury releases from a heating unit or mercury pressure gauge has ranged from \$15,000 to \$300,000, per release.

HONEYWELL HEAT GENERATOR

If a Honeywell heat generator is encountered in a home and it needs to be removed, it should be removed in a manner that ensures no mercury is released from the unit. First, remove the unit from the home intact. Then drain the mercury from the heat generator into a plastic airtight container for proper disposal or recycling in accordance with appropriate state regulations.



Figure 2: The Honeywell heat generator disassembled.

LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

Section 104 of the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act of 1980 as amended, 42 U.S.C. §9604, also known as the Superfund law, gives EPA the legal authority to respond to mercury releases. The Superfund law also gives EPA the authority to identify the party responsible for the release, order those who improperly handle mercury to take appropriate response actions, and/or compel them to pay for a cleanup.

The Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act requires that any release of mercury greater than one pound, which is approximately two tablespoons, must be reported to the National Response Center at 1-800-424-8802.

HUMAN HEALTH EFFECTS OF MERCURY EXPOSURE

Mercury spills present a serious environmental and health problem. Inhaling mercury vapors, which are colorless and odorless, or ingesting mercury can cause irreversible damage to the brain and kidneys. Mercury can also enter the body through contact with the skin and by eating fish contaminated with mercury. The central nervous system, eyes, and respiratory system can also be affected by mercury. Developing fetuses and children are the most sensitive to mercury exposure. Mercury exposure can be detected in the body through blood and urine tests.

WHO TO CONTACT

If you know of a spill that has occurred that was not cleaned up properly, or if you have questions regarding the proper disposal of mercury, please call the number in your area.

	Emergency spills	Disposal questions
Iowa	515-281-8694	515-281-8693
Kansas	785-296-1679 (daytime) 785-296-0614 (evenings and weekends)	785-296-1600
Missouri	573-634-2436	800-361-4827
Nebraska	402-669-9181	402-669-9181

For additional information on mercury and mercury releases or in case of an emergency, please contact EPA's emergency spill phone at 913-281-0991.